

ARTICLE APPEARED
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WASHINGTON POST
26 October 1983

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The Israeli Card Didn't Play

During agonizing hours following Sunday's Beirut massacre, the Pentagon deflected a long-anticipated move to seek Israel's help out of the Lebanese quagmire, pushing hard instead for the earliest possible exodus of the Marines consistent with American credibility and honor.

For weeks, during slowly escalating sniper fire against the undefendable Marines, high administration officials in the State Department and White House had eyed the U.S.-supplied military might of Israel as a last-ditch, sure-fire response to Islamic extremists. It was presumed at State and in the intelligence community that if a disaster happened, the Syrians would be behind it and Israel could handle Syria.

Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger, backed to a man by the Joint Chiefs of Staff, objected. He feared that a turn toward Israel would plunge U.S. stock in the Arab world to dangerous lows, opening up the oil-rich Middle East to a new chapter of Soviet exploitation.

So well did Weinberger carry that argument into the West Wing base-

ment when President Reagan summoned the National Security Council last Sunday that the "Israeli option" is now a dead letter. It will remain so, unless the savage act against the Marines can be laid at the doorstep of Damascus. With or without help from Israel (help it might not wish to give), Weinberger set the United States firmly against any military response.

"The Israeli card looked potent until the time came to play it," one policy insider said. The result of inducing an Israeli strike against Syrian forces in Lebanon would be "psychic satisfaction," he explained, but the closer U.S.-Israeli strategic partnership would drive the wedge deeper between Washington and moderate Arab states.

From the moment Sunday's deliberations began, Weinberger suggested he was prepared to fight within the administration against a new U.S.-Israeli military partnership. As the first top official to comment on the massacre, following Reagan himself, Weinberger hinted that pro-Iranian fundamentalists of the Shiite sect were to blame. He had no firm evidence, but his insinuations purposely left the way open for Reagan to

pursue new understandings with Syria while the CIA and allied intelligence services search for who really did it.

With the instigators of last April's murderous assault on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut still not absolutely certain, it is likely that the world will not soon learn the identity of last Sunday's terrorists. That makes revenge or sensible retaliation difficult. "The president is not vengeful," a White House aide told us, "because he knows we have not been able to locate or even identify the perpetrators."

That alleviates concerns of Weinberger and the Joint Chiefs that seeking reprisals with the help of Israel's awesome military power would damage the United States throughout Islam, from North Africa to the Persian Gulf. Instead of retaliation, the Pentagon wants new ways to guarantee maximum security for the Marines for as brief a time as possible before withdrawing them.

Reagan is being urged by a variety of advisers inside and outside the administration—including Henry Kissinger—to make a new push for the 1982 West Bank peace plan, using all his influence to force both Israel and Jordan into line. But no breakthrough on his long-be-calmed peace plan is expected in time to facilitate a graceful withdrawal from Lebanon as soon as Reagan wants it and needs it. Weinberger is clearly telling the president that he cannot wait that long to bring out the Marines.

Reagan refused to listen to the secretary of defense and the Joint Chiefs when they warned that he would be creating a disaster waiting to happen if he sent the Marines to Lebanon. Now that Weinberger has been proved tragically correct, the president's ear, for the moment at least, may be more closely attuned to the Pentagon.

Grandiose hopes of a miraculous breakthrough on the West Bank or anywhere else in the Mideast seem as detached from the cold, new reality in this capital as an American-backed Israeli military thrust against Syria. Despite his statement on Monday that the Marines were staying, Ronald Reagan was getting ready to cut losses as soon as he can do it without running away, and that could be the beginning of wisdom.